

Celebrating Martin Luther's Death

It was the 18th of February, 1546. Martin Luther had returned to his birthplace, the town of Eisleben, to help settle a dispute in nearby Mansfeld. Luther had been ill, but successfully finished the negotiations. He concluded the business by preaching on Matthew 11:25-30. During his sermon, he was suddenly overcome by weakness. Quickly ending his sermon, he returned to his room.

He rested the next day, but that evening his heart began racing. Later, feeling better, he slept. At 1:00am Luther suddenly woke up. 'Oh, dear Lord God!' he shouted, 'My pain is so great! Oh, dear Dr Jonas, I am certain that I will remain here in Eisleben where I was born and baptized!'

The whole crowd rushed to Luther's bedside. Each tried to comfort him. But Luther kept repeating, 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only son. . . .' At that point, Doctor Jonas asked him, 'Doctor Martin, Reverend Father, are you now ready to die in the faith of Christ and the doctrine which you preached in His name?' Luther answered, loudly and distinctly, 'Yes.'

As one eyewitness reported: "Then he turned on his right side and slept for some minutes, so that we hoped he was getting better. Then came the death rattle, a deep drawn breath, and he was gone. Thus he departed peacefully and patiently in the Lord between two and three o'clock a.m. God be merciful unto us all and help us. Amen."

A scrap of paper was found in Luther's pocket, a note he had written two days earlier. "No one can understand Virgil [the Roman Poet] in his *Bucolics* and *Georgics* unless he has spent five years as a shepherd or farmer. No one understands Cicero [Roman orator] in his letters unless he has served under an outstanding government for twenty years. No one should believe that he has tasted the Holy Scriptures sufficiently unless he has spent one hundred years leading churches with the prophets. . . . *Wir sind alle Bettler. Hoc est verum.* We are all beggars. That is true."

On Sunday, February 19th, we are going to commemorate the death of Martin Luther as part of our Reformation 500 celebrations. How can a death be part of a celebration? Just look at the faith that Martin Luther not only preached and taught, but that he also personally confessed even amid the pain that signaled his impending death.

Martin Luther, more than most, saw what we poor, miserable sinners really are: *Bettler*. Beggars. We fall down on our faces before God in fear and humility, having nothing but empty sacks. Yet graciously, lovingly, wondrously, God fills our sacks with hope and help, comfort and joy, forgiveness, life, and salvation. He fills us with Christ, and turns us from beggars into kings.

It's all His gift, all by His mercy, without any merit or worthiness in us. One who dies in that faith knows what God has promised, and rests in the Lord waiting for the great Resurrection that is yet to come. That is a death to be celebrated! God grant each of us such a blessed end!

And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Blessed indeed," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!" (Revelation 14:13).